

THE INCOMPARABLE
**THEODORE
STURGEON**

The Stars Are the Styx

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FIRST
BOOK
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The Stars Are The Styx

by Theodore Sturgeon

Notes

Every few years someone thinks to call me Charon. It never lasts. I guess I don't look the part.

Charon, you'll remember, was the somber ferryman who steered the boat across the River Styx, taking the departed souls over to the Other Side. He's usually pictured as a grim, taciturn character, tall and gaunt.

I get called Charon, but that's not what I look like. I'm not exactly taciturn, and I don't go around in a flapping black cloak. I'm too fat. Maybe too old, too.

It's a shrewd gag, though, calling me Charon. I do pass human souls Out, and for nearly half of them, the stars are indeed the Styx— they will never return.

I have two things I know Charon had. One is that bitter difference from the souls I deal with.

They have lost only one world; the other is before them. But I'm rejected by both.

The other thing has to do with a little-known fragment of the Charon legend. And that, I think, is worth a yarn.

IT'S JUDSON'S yarn, and I wish he was here to tell it himself—which is foolish; the yarn's about why he isn't here. "Here" is Curbstone, by the way—the stepping-off place to the Other Side. It's Earth's other slow satellite, bumbling along out past the Moon. It was built 7800 years ago for heavy interplanetary transfer, though of course there's not much of that left any more. It's so easy to synthesize anything nowadays that there's just no call for imports. We make what we need from energy, and there's plenty of that around. There's plenty of everything. Even insecurity, though you have to come to Curbstone for that, and be someone like Judson to boot.

It's no secret—now—that insecurity is vital to the Curbstone project.

In a cushioned existence on a stable Earth, volunteers for Curbstone are rare. But they come in—the adventurous, the dissatisfied, the yearning ones, to man the tiny ships that will, in due time, give mankind a segment of space so huge that even mankind's voracious appetite for expansion will be glutted for millenia. There is a vision that haunts all humans today—that of a network of force-beams in the form of a tremendous sphere, encompassing much of the known universe and a great deal of the unknown—through which, like thought impulses through the synaptic paths of a giant brain, matter will be transmitted instantly, and a man may step from here to the depths of space while his heart beats once. The vision frightens most and lures a few, and of those few, some are chosen to go out. Judson was chosen.

I knew he'd come to Curbstone. I'd known it for years, ever since I was on Earth and met him. He was just a youngster then, thirty or so, and boiling around under that soft-spoken, shockproof surface of his was something that had to drive him to Curbstone. It showed when he raised his eyes. They got hungry. Any kind of hunger is rare on Earth. That's what Curbstone's for. The ultimate social balance—an escape for the unbalanced.

Don't wince like that when I say 'unbalanced'. Plain talk is plain talk. You can afford to be mighty plain about social imbalance these days. It's rare and it's slight. Thing is, when a man goes through fifteen years of primary social—childhood, I'm talking about—with all the subtle tinkering that involves, and still has an imbalance, it's a thing that sticks with him no matter how slight it is. Even then, the very existence of Curbstone is enough to make most of 'em quite happy to stay where they are. The handful who do head for Curbstone do it because they have to. Once here, only about half make the final plunge. The rest go back—or live here permanently. Whatever they do, Curbstone takes care of the imbalance.

When you come right down to it, misfits are that way either because they lack something or because they have something *extra*. On Earth there's a place for everything and everything's in its place. On Curbstone you find someone who has what you lack, or who has the same extra something you have—or you leave. You go back feeling that Earth's a pretty nice safe place after all, or you go Out, and it doesn't matter to anyone else, ever, whether you're happy or not.

I WAS waiting in the entry bell when Judson arrived on Curbstone. Judson had nothing to do with that. I didn't even know he was on that particular shuttle. It's just that, aside from the fact that I happen to be

Senior Release Officer on Curbstone, I like to meet the shuttles. All sorts of people come here, for all sorts of reasons. They stay here or they don't for all sorts of other reasons. I like to look at the faces that come down that ramp and guess which ones will go which way. I'm pretty good at it. As soon as I saw Judson's face I knew that this boy was bound Out. I recognized that about him even before I realized who it was.

There was a knot of us there to watch the newcomers come in. Most were there just because it's worth watching them all, the hesitant ones, the damn-it-alls, the grim ones. But two Curbstoners I noticed particularly. Hunters both. One was a lean, slick-haired boy named Wold. It was pretty obvious what he was hunting. The other was Flower. It was just as obvious what she had her long, wide-spaced eyes out for, but it was hard to tell why. Last I had heard, she had been solidly wrapped up in an Outbounder called Clinton.

I forgot about the wolf and the vixen when I recognized Judson and bellowed at him. He dropped his kit where he stood and came bounding over to me. He grabbed both my biceps and squeezed while I thumped his ribs. "I was waiting up for you, Judson," I grinned at him.

"MAN, I'm glad you're still here," he said. He was a sandy-haired fellow, all Adam's apple and guarded eyes.

"I'm here for the duration," I told him. "Didn't you know?"

"No, I—I mean..."

"Don't be tactful, Jud," I said. "I belong here by virtue of the fact that there's nowhere else for me to go. Earth isn't happy about men as fat and funny-looking as I am in the era of beautiful people. And I can't go Out. I have a left axis deviation. I know that sounds political; actually it's cardiac."

"I'm, sorry." He looked at my brassard. "Well, you're Mr. Big around here, anyway."

"I'm just big around *here*," I said, swatting my belt-line. "There's Coördination Office and a half-squad of Guardians who ice this particular cake. I'm just the final check on Outbounders."

"Yeah," he said. "You don't rate. Much. The whole function of this space-station waits on whether you say yes to a departure."

“Shecks now,” I said, exaggerating my embarrassment to cover up my exaggerated embarrassment.

“Whatever, I wouldn’t worry too much if I were you. I could be wrong—we’ll have to run some more tests on you—but if ever I saw an Outbounder, it’s you.”

“Hi,” said a silken voice. “You already know each other. How nice.”

Flower.

There was something vaguely reptilian about Flower, which didn’t take a thing from her brand of magnetism. Bit by bit, piece by piece, she was a so-so looking girl. Her eyes were too long, and so dark they seemed to be all pupil and the whites too white. Her nose was a bit too large and her chin a bit too small, but so help me, there never was a more perfect mouth. Her voice was like a ’cello bowed up near the bridge. She was tall, with a fragile-in-the-middle slenderness and spring-steel flanks. The overall effect was breathtaking. I didn’t like her. She didn’t like me either. She never spoke to me except on business, and I had practically no business with her. She’d been here a long time. I hadn’t figured out why, then. But she wouldn’t go Out and she wouldn’t go back to Earth—which in itself was all right; we had lots of room.

LET me tell you something about modern women and therefore something about Flower—something you might not reason out unless you get as old and objective as I’ve somehow lived to become.

Used to be, according to what I’ve read, that clothes ran a lot to what I might call indicative concealment. As long as clothes had the slightest excuse of functionalism, people in general and women in particular made a large fuss over something called innate modesty—which never did exist; it had to be learned. But as long as there was weather around to blame clothes on, the myth was accepted. People exposed what the world was indifferent to in order to whip up interest in the rest. “Modesty is not so simple a virtue as honesty,” one of the old books says. Clothes as weatherproofing got themselves all mixed up with clothes as ornament; fashions came and went and people followed them.

But for the past three hundred years or so there hasn’t been any “weather” as such, for anyone, here or on Earth. Clothes for only aesthetic purposes became more and more the rule, until today it’s up to the individual to choose what he’s going to wear, if anything. An

earring and a tattoo are quite as acceptable in public as forty meters of iridescent plastiweb and a two-meter coiffure.

Now, most people today are healthy, well-selected, and good to look at. Women are still as vain as ever. A woman with a bodily defect, real or imagined, has one of two choices: She can cover the defect with something artfully placed to look as if that was just the best place for it, or she can leave the defect in the open, knowing that no one today is going to judge her completely in terms of the defect. Folks nowadays generally wait until they can find out what kind of a human being you are.

But a woman who has no particular defect generally changes her clothes with her mood. It might be a sash only this morning, but a trailing drape this afternoon. Tomorrow it might be a one-sided blouse and clinging trousers. You can take it as a very significant thing when such a woman *always* covers up. She's keeping her natural warmth, as it were, under forced draft.

I didn't go into all this ancient history to impress you with my scholastics. I'm using it to illustrate a very important facet of Flower's complex character. Because Flower was one of those forced-draft jobs. Except on the sun-field and in the swimming pools, where no one ever wears clothes, Flower always affected a tunic of some kind.

The day Judson arrived, she wore a definitive example of what I mean. It was a single loose black garment with straight shoulders and no sleeves. On both sides, from a point a hand's-breath below the armpit, down to the hipbone, it was slit open. It fastened snugly under her throat with one magne-clasp, but was also slit from there to the navel. It did not quite reach to mid-thigh, and the soft material carried a light biostatic electrical charge, so that it clung to and fell away from her body as she moved. So help me, she was a walking demand for the revival of the extinct profession of peeping Tom.

This, then, was what horned in on my first few words with Judson. I should have known from the way she looked that she was planning something—something definitely for herself. I should have been doubly warned by the fact that she took the trouble to speak up just when she did—just when I told Jud he was a certifiable Outbender if I ever saw one.

So then and there I made my big mistake. "Flower," I said, "this is Judson."

She used the second it took me to speak to suck in her lower lip, so that when she smiled slowly at Jud, the lip swelled visibly as if by blood pressure. “I *am* glad,” she all but whispered.

And then she had the craft to turn the smile on me and walk away without another word.

“... Gah!” said Judson through a tight glottis.

“That,” I told him, “was beautifully phrased. Gah, indeed. Reel your eyeballs back in, Jud. We’ll drop your duffel off at the Outbound quarters and— *Judson!*”

Flower had disappeared down the inner ramp. I was aware that Judson had just started to breathe again. “What?” he asked me.

I waddled over and picked up his gear. “Come on,” I said, and steered him by the arm.

JUDSON had nothing to say until after we found him a room and started for my sector. “Who is she?”

“A hardy perennial,” I said. “Came up to Curbstone two years ago. She’s never been certified. She’ll get around to it soon—or never. Are you going right ahead?”

“Just how do you handle the certification?”

“Give you some stuff to read. Pound some more knowledge into you for six, seven nights while you sleep. Look over your reflexes, physical and mental. An examination. If everything’s all right, you’re certified.”

“Then—Out?”

I shrugged. “If you like. You come to Curbstone strictly on your own. You take your course if and when you like. And after you’ve been certified, you leave when you want to, with someone or not, and without telling anyone unless you care to.”

“Man, when you people say ‘Voluntary’ you’re not just talking!”

“There’s no other way to handle a thing like this. And you can bet that we get more people Out this way than we ever would on a compulsory basis. In the long run, I mean, and this is a long-term project...

six thousand years long.”

He walked silently for a time, and I was pretty sure I knew his thoughts. For Outbounders there is no return, and the best possible chance they have of survival is something like fifty-four per cent, a figure which was arrived at after calculations so complex that it might as well be called a guess. You don't force people Out against those odds. They go by themselves, driven by their own reasoning, or they don't go at all.

AFTER a time Judson said, "I always thought Outbounders were assigned a ship and a departure time. With certified people leaving whenever they feel like it, what's to prevent uncertified ones from doing it?"

"That I'm about to show you." We passed the Coördination offices and headed out to the launching racks. They were shut off from Top Central Corridor by a massive gate. Over the gate floated three words in glowing letters:

SPECIES

GROUP

SELF

Seeing Jud's eyes on it, I explained, "The three levels of survival. They're in all of us. You can judge a man by the way he lines them up. The ones who have them in that order are the best. It's a good thought for Outbounders to take away with them." I watched his face.

"Particularly since it's always the third item that brings 'em this far."

Jud smiled slowly. "Along with all that bumbling you carry a sting, don't you?"

"Mine is a peculiar job," I grinned back. "Come on in."

I put my palm on the key-plate. It tingled for a brief, moment and then the shining doors slid back. I rolled through, stopping just inside the launching court at Judson's startled yelp.

"Well, come on," I said.

He stood just inside the doors, straining mightily against nothing at all. "Wh—wh—?" His arms were spread and his feet slipped as if he were trying to force his way through a steel wall.

Actually he was working on something a good deal stronger than that. “That’s the answer to why uncertified people don’t go Out,” I told him. “The plate outside scanned the whorls and lines of my hand.

The door opened and that Gillis-Menton field you’re muscling passed me through. It’ll pass anyone who’s certified, too, but no one else. Now stop pushing or you’ll suddenly fall on your face.”

I stepped to the left bulkhead and palmed the plate there, then beckoned to Judson. He approached the invisible barrier timidly. It wasn’t there. He came all the way through, and I took my hand off the scanner.

“That second plate,” I explained, “works for me and certified people only. There’s no way for an uncertified person to get into the launching court unless I bring him in personally. It’s as simple as that.

When the certified are good and ready, they go. If they want to go Out with a banquet and a parade beforehand, they can. If they want to roll out of bed some night and slip Out quietly, they can. Most of

’em do it quietly. Come on and have a look at the ships.”

WE CROSSED the court to the row of low doorways along the far wall. I opened one at random and we stepped into the ship.

“It’s just a room!”

“They all say that,” I chuckled. “I suppose you expected a planet-type space job, only more elaborate.”

“I thought they’d at least *look* like ships. This is a double room out of some luxury hotel.”

“It’s that, and then some.” I showed him around—the capacious food lockers, the automatic air re-circulators, and, most comforting of all, the synthesizer, which meant food, fuel, tools and materials converted directly from energy to matter.

“Curbstone’s more than a space station, Jud. It’s a factory, for one thing. When you decide to go on your way, you’ll flip that lever by the door. (You’ll be catapulted out—you won’t feel it, because of the stasis generator and artificial gravity.) As soon as you’re gone, another ship will come up from below into this slot. By the time you’re clear of Curbstone’s gravitic field and slip into hyper-drive, the new ship’ll be

waiting for passengers.”

“And that will be going on for six thousand years?”

“More or less.”

“That’s a powerful lot of ships.”

“As long as Outbounders keep the quota, it is indeed. Nine hundred thousand—including forty-six per cent failure.”

“Failure,” said Jud. He looked at me and I held his gaze.

“Yes,” I said. “The forty-six per cent who are not expected to *get* where they are going. The ones who materialize inside solid matter. The ones who go into the space-time nexus and never come out. The ones who reach their assigned synaptic junction and wait, and wait, and wait until they die of old age because no one gets to them soon enough. The ones who go mad and kill themselves or their shipmates.”

I spread my hands. “The forty-six per cent.”

“You can convince a man of danger,” said Judson evenly, “but nobody ever believed he was really and truly going to die. Death is something that happens to other people. I won’t be one of the forty-six per cent.”

That was Judson. I wish he was still here.

I let the remark lie there on the thick carpet and went on with my guided tour. I showed him the casing of the intricate beam-power apparatus that contained the whole reason for the project, and gave him a preliminary look at the astrogational and manual maneuvering equipment and controls. “But don’t bother your pretty little head about it just now,” I added. “It’ll all be crammed into you before you get certified.”

We went back to the court, closing the door of the ship behind us.

“There’s a lot of stuff piled into those ships,” I observed, “but the one thing that can’t be packed in sardine-size is the hyper-drive. I suppose you know that.”

“I’ve heard something about it. The initial kick into second-order space comes from the station here, doesn’t it? But how is the ship returned to normal space on arrival?”

“That’s technology so refined it sounds like mysticism,” I answered. “I

don't begin to understand it. I can give you an analogy, though. It takes a power source, a compression device, and valving to fill a pneumatic tire. It takes a plain nail to let the air out again. See what I mean?"

"Vaguely. Anyway, the important thing is that Outbound is strictly one way. Those ships never come back. Right?"

"So right."

One of the doors behind us opened, and a girl stepped out of a ship. "Oh... I didn't know there was anyone here!" she said, and came toward us with a long, easy stride. "Am I in the way?"

"*YOU*—in the way, Tween?" I answered. "Not a chance." I was very fond of Tween. To these jaded old eyes she was one of the loveliest things that ever happened. Two centuries ago, before variation limits were as rigidly set as they are now, Eugenics dreamed up her kind—olive-skinned true-breeds with the silver hair and deep ruby eyes of an albino. It was an experiment they should never have stopped.

Albinoism wasn't dominant, but in Tween it had come out strongly. She wore her hair long—really long; she could tuck the ends of it under her toes and stand up straight when it was loose. Now it was braided in two ingenious halves of a coronet that looked like real silver. Around her throat and streaming behind her as she walked was a single length of flame-colored material.

"This is Judson, Tween," I said. "We were friends back on Earth. What are you up to?"

She laughed, a captivating, self-conscious laugh. "I was sitting in a ship pretending that it was Outside.

We'd looked at each other one day and suddenly said, 'Let's!' and off we'd gone." Her face was luminous. "It was lovely. And that's just what we're going to do one of these days. You'll see."

"'We'? Oh—you mean Wold."

"Wold," she breathed, and I wished, briefly and sharply, that someone, somewhere, someday would speak my name like that. And on the heels of that reaction came the mental picture of Wold as I had seen him an hour before, slick and smooth, watching the shuttle passengers with his dark hunting eyes. There was nothing I could say,

though. My duties have their limits. If Wold didn't know a good thing when he saw it, that was his hard luck.

But looking at that shining face, I knew it would be her hard luck. "You're certified?" Judson asked, awed.

"Oh, yes," she smiled, and I said, "Sure is, Jud. But she had her troubles, didn't you, Tween?"

We started for the gate. "I did indeed," said Tween. (I loved hearing her talk. There was a comforting, restful quality to her speech like silence when an unnoticed, irritating noise disappears.) "I just didn't have the logical aptitudes when I first came. Some things just wouldn't stick in my head, even in hypnopedia. All the facts in the universe won't help if you don't know how to put them together." She grinned. "I used to hate you."

"Don't blame you a bit." I nudged Judson. "I turned down her certification eight times. She used to come to my office to get the bad news, and she'd stand there after I'd told her and shuffle her feet and gulp a little bit. And the first thing she said then was always, 'Well, when can I start retraining?'"

SHE flushed, laughing. "You're telling secrets!"

Judson touched her. "It's all right. I don't think less of you for any of his maunderings... You must have wanted that certificate very much."

"Yes," she said. "Very much."

"Could—could I ask why?"

She looked at him, in him, through him, past him. "All our lives," she said quietly, "are safe and sure and small. This—" she waved back towards the ships—"is the only thing in our experience that's none of those things. I could give you fifty reasons for going Out. But I think they all come down to that one."

We were silent for a moment, and then I said, "I'll put that in my notebook, Tween. You couldn't be more right. Modern life gives us infinite variety in everything except the magnitude of the things we do.

And that stays pretty tiny." And, I thought, big, fat, superannuated station officials, rejected by one world and unqualified for the next. A small chore for a small mind.

“The only reason most of us do puny things and think puny thoughts,” Judson was saying, “is that Earth has too few jobs like his in these efficient times.”

“Too few men like him for jobs like his,” Tween corrected.

I blinked at them both. It was me they were talking about. I don’t think I changed expression much, but I felt as warm as the color of Tween’s eyes.

WE PASSED through the gates, Tween first with never a thought for the barrier which did not exist for her, then Judson, waiting cautiously for my go-ahead after the inside scanning plate had examined the whorls and lines of my hand. I followed, and the great gates closed behind us.

“Want to come up to the office?” I asked Tween when we reached Central Corridor.

“Thanks, no,” she said. “I’m going to find Wold.” She turned to Judson. “You’ll be certified quickly,”

she told him. “I just know. But, Judson—”

“Say it, whatever it is,” said Jud, sensing her hesitation.

“I was going to say get certified first. Don’t try to decide anything else before that. You’ll have to take my word for it, but nothing that ever happened to you is quite like the knowledge that you’re free to go through those gates any time you feel like it.”

Judson’s face assumed a slightly puzzled, slightly stubborn expression. It disappeared, and I knew it was a conscious effort for him to do it. Then he put out his hand and touched her heavy silver hair.

“Thanks,” he said.

She strode off, the carriage of her head telling us that her face was eager as she went to Wold. At the turn of the corridor she waved and was gone.

“I’m going to miss that girl,” I said, and turned back to Judson. The puzzled, stubborn look was back, full force. “What’s the matter?”

“What did she mean by that sisterly advice about getting certified first? What else would I have to decide about right now?”

I swatted his shoulder. “Don’t let it bother you, Jud. She sees something in you that you can’t see yourself, yet.”

That didn’t satisfy him at all. “Like what?” When I didn’t answer, he asked, “You see it, too, don’t you?”

We started up the ramp to my office. “I like you,” I said. “I liked you the minute I laid eyes on you, years ago, when you were just a sprout.”

“You’ve changed the subject.”

“Hell I have. Now let me save my wind for the ramp.” This was only slightly a stall. As the years went by, that ramp seemed to get steeper and steeper. Twice Coördination had offered to power it for me and I’d refused haughtily. I could see the time coming when I was going to be too heavy for my high-horse.

All the same, I was glad for the chance to stall my answer to Judson’s question. The answer lay in my liking him; I knew that instinctively. But it needed thinking through. We’ve conditioned ourselves too much to analyze our dislikes and to take our likes for granted.

THE outer door opened as we approached. There was a man waiting in the appointment foyer, a big fellow with a gray cape and a golden circlet around his blue-black hair. “Clinton!” I said. “How are you, son? Waiting for me?”

The inner door opened for me and I went into my office, Clinton behind me. I fell down in my specially molded chair and waved him to a relaxer. At the door Judson cleared his throat. “Shall I—uh...”

Clinton looked up swiftly, an annoyed, tense motion. He raked a blazing blue gaze across Jud, and his expression changed. “Come in, for God’s sake. Newcomer, hm? Sit down. Listen. You can’t learn enough about this project. Or these people. Or the kind of flat spin an Outbounder can get himself into.”

“Clint, this’s Judson,” I said. “Jud, Clint’s about the itchy-footedest Outbounder of them all. What is on your mind, son?”

Clinton wet his lips. “How’s about me heading Out— *alone*?”

I said, “Your privilege, if you think you’ll enjoy it.”

He smacked a heavy fist into his palm. “Good, then.”

“Of course,” I said, looking at the overhead, “the ships are built for two. I’d personally be a bit troubled about the prospect of spending—uh—however long it might be, staring at that empty bunk across the way. Specially,” I added, loudly, to interrupt what he was going to say, “if I had to spend some hours or weeks or maybe a decade with the knowledge that I was alone because I took off with a mad on.”

“This isn’t what you might call a fit of pique,” snapped Clinton. “It’s been years building—first because I had a need and recognised it; second because the need got greater when I started to work toward filling it; third because I found who and what would satisfy it; fourth because I was so wrong on point three.”

“You *are* wrong? Or you’re *afraid* you’re wrong?”

He looked at me blankly. “I don’t know,” he said, all the snap gone out of his voice. “Not for sure.”

“Well, then, you’ve no real problem. All you do is ask yourself whether it’s worthwhile to take off alone because of a problem you haven’t solved. If it is, go ahead.”

He rose and went to the door. “Clinton!” My voice must have crackled; he stopped without turning, and from the corner of my eye I saw Judson sit up abruptly. I said, more quietly, “When Judson here suggested that he go away and leave us alone, why did you tell him to come in? What did you see in him that made you do it?”

Clinton’s thoughtfully slitted eyes hardly masked their blazing blue as he turned them on Judson, who squirmed like a schoolboy. Clinton said, “I think it’s because he looks as if he can be reached. And trusted. That answer you?”

“It does.” I waved him out cheerfully. Judson said, “You have an awesome way of operating.”

“On him?”

“On both of us. How do you know what you did by turning his problem back on himself? He’s likely to go straight to the launching-court.”

“He won’t.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” I said flatly. “If Clinton hadn’t already decided *not* to take off alone—not today, anyhow—he wouldn’t have come to see me and get argued out of it.”

“What’s really bothering him?”

“I can’t say.” I wouldn’t say. Not to Judson. Not now, at least. Clinton was ripe to leave, and he was the kind to act when ready. He had found what he thought was the perfect human being for him to go with. She wasn’t ready to go. She never in all time and eternity would be ready to go.

“All right,” said Jud. “What about me? That was very embarrassing.”

I LAUGHED at him. “Sometimes when you don’t know exactly how to phrase something for yourself, you can shock a stranger into doing it for you. Why did I like you on sight, years ago, and now, too? Why did Clinton feel you were trustworthy? Why did Tween feel free to pass you some advice—and what prompted the advice? Why did—” No. Don’t mention the most significant one of all.

Leave her out of it. “—Well, there’s no point in itemizing all afternoon. Clinton said it. *You can be reached*. Practically anyone meeting you knows—*feels*, anyhow—that you can be reached...

touched... affected. We like feeling that we have an effect on someone.”

Judson closed his eyes, screwed up his brow. I knew he was digging around in his memory, thinking of close and casual acquaintances... how many of them... how much they had meant to him and he to them. He looked at me. “Should I change?”

“God, no! Only—don’t let it be *too* true. I think that’s what Tween was driving at when she said not to jump at any decisions until you’ve reached the comparative serenity of certification.”

“Serenity... I could use some of that,” he murmured. “Jud.”

“Mm?”

“Did you ever try to put into one simple statement just why you came to Curbstone?”

He looked startled. Like most people, he had been living, and living ardently, without ever wondering particularly what for. And like most

people, he had sooner or later had to answer the jackpot question:

“What am I doing here?”

“I CAME because—because... no, that wouldn’t be a simple statement.”

“All right. Run it off, anyway. A simple statement will come out of it if there’s anything really important there. Any basic is simple, Jud. Every basic is important. Complicated matters may be fascinating, frightening, funny, intriguing, worrisome, educational, or what have you; but if they’re complicated, they are, by definition, not important.”

He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. His hands wound tightly around one another, and his head went down.

“I came here... looking for something. Not because I thought it was here. There was just nowhere else left to look. Earth is under such strict discipline... discipline by comfort; discipline by constructive luxury. Every need is taken care of that you can name, and no one seems to understand that the needs you *can’t* name are the important ones. And all Earth is in a state of arrested development because of Curbstone. Everything is held in check. The *status quo* rules because for six thousand years it must and will. Six thousand years of physical and social evolution will be sacrificed for the single tremendous step that Curbstone makes possible. And I couldn’t find a place for myself in the static part of the plan, so the only place for me to go was to the active part.”

He was quiet so long after that, I felt I had to nudge him along. “Could it be that there *is* a way to make you happy on Earth, and you just haven’t been able to find it?”

“Oh, no,” he said positively. Then he raised his head and stared at me. “Wait a minute. You’re very close to the mark there. That—that simple statement is trying to crawl out.” He frowned. This time I kept my mouth shut and watched him.

“The something I’m looking for,” he said finally, in the surest tones he’d used yet, “is something I lack, or something I have that I haven’t been able to name yet. If there’s anything on Earth or here that can fill that hollow place, and if I find it, I won’t want to go Out. I won’t need to go—I *shouldn’t* go. But if it doesn’t exist for me here, then Out I go, as part of a big something, rather than as a something missing a part.

Wait!" He chewed his lower lip. His knuckle-joints crackled as he twisted his hands together. "I'll rephrase that and you'll have your simple statement."

He took a deep breath and said, "I came to Curbstone to find out... whether there's something I haven't had yet that belongs to me, or whether I... belong to something that hasn't had me yet."

"Fine," I said. "Very damned fine. You keep looking, Jud. The answer's here, somewhere, in some form. I've never heard it put better: Do you owe, or are you owed? There are three possible courses open to you, no matter which way you decide."

"There are? Three?"

I put up fingers one at a time. "Earth. Here. Out."

"I—see."

"And you can take the course of any one of the words you saw floating over the gate to the launching court."

He stood up. "I've got a lot to think about."

"You have."

"But I've got me one hell of a blueprint."

I just grinned at him.

"You through with me?" he asked.

"For now."

"When do I start work for my certificate?"

"At the moment, you're just about four-ninths through."

"You dog! All this has been—"

"I'm a working man, Jud. I work all the time. Now beat it. You'll hear from me."

"You dog," he said again. "You old *hound-dog*!" But he left.

I sat back to think. I thought about Judson, of course. And Clinton and

his worrisome solo ideas. The trip can be done solo, but it isn't a good idea. The human mind's communications equipment isn't a convenience—it's a vital necessity. Tween. How beautiful can a girl get? And the way she lights up when she thinks about going Out. She's certified now. Guess she and Wold will be taking off any time now.

Then my mind spun back to Flower. Put those pieces together... something should fit. Turn it this way, back—Ah! Clinton wants Out. He's been waiting and waiting for his girl to get certified. She hasn't even tried. He's not going to wait much longer. Who's his girl now...?

Flower.

Flower, who turned all that heat on Judson.

Why Judson? There were bigger men, smarter, better-looking ones. What was special about Judson?

I filed the whole item away in my mind—with a red priority tab on it.

THE days went by. A gong chimed and the number-board over my desk glowed. I didn't have to look up the numbers to know who it was. Fort and Mariellen. Nice kids. Slipped Out during a sleep period. I thought about them, watched the chain of checking lights flicker on, one after another.

Palm-patterns removed from the Gate scanner; they'd never be used there again. Ship replaced.

Quarters cleared and readied. Launching time reported to Coördination. Marriage recorded. Automatic machinery calculated, filed, punched cards, activated more automatic machinery until Fort and Mariellen were only axial alignments on the molecules of a magnetic tape... names... memories... dead, perhaps; gone, certainly, for the next six thousand years.

Hold tight, Earth! Wait for them, the fifty-four per cent (I hope, I ardently hope) who will come back.

Their relatives, their Earthbound friends will be long dead, and all their children and theirs; so let the Outbounders come home at least to the same Earth, the same language, the same traditions. They will be the millennial traditions of a more-than-Earth, the source of the unthinkable spatial sphere made fingertip-available to humankind through the efforts of the Outbounders. Earth is prepaying six thousand years of progress in exchange for the ability to use stars for

stepping-stones, to be able to make Mars in a minute, Antares and Betelgeuse afternoon stops in a delivery run. Six thousand years of sacred stasis buys all but a universe, conquers Time, eliminates the fractionation of humanity into ship-riding, minute-shackled fragments of diverging evolution among the stars. All the stars will be in the next room when the Outbounders return.

Six thousand times around Sol, with Sol moving in a moving galaxy, and the galaxy in flight through a fluxing universe. That all amounts to a resultant movement of Earth through nine Mollner degrees around the Universal Curve. For six thousand years Curbstone flings off its tiny ships, its monstrous power-plant kicking them into space-time and the automatics holding them there until all—or until enough—are positioned. Some will materialize in the known universe and some in faintly suspected nebulae; some will appear in the empty nothingnesses beyond the galactic clusters, and some will burst into normal space inside molten suns.

BUT when the time comes, and the little ships are positioned in a great spherical pattern out around space, and together they become real again, they will send to each other a blaze of tight-beam energy.

Like the wiring of a great switchboard, like the synapses of a brain, each beam will find its neighbors, and through them Earth.

And then, within and all through that sphere, humanity will spread, stepping from rim to rim of the universe in seconds, instantaneously transmitting men and materials from and to the stars. Here a ship can be sent piecemeal and assembled, there a space-station. Yonder, on some unheard-of planet of an unknown star, men light years away from Earth can assemble matter transceivers and hook them up to the great sphere, and add yet another world to those already visited.

AND what of the Outbounders? Real time, six thousand years.

Ship's time, from second-order spatial entry to materialization— *zero*.

Fort and Mariellen. Nice kids. Memories now; lights on a board, one after another, until they're all accounted for. At Curbstone, the quiet machinery says, "Next!"

Fort and Mariellen. Clinging together, they press down the launching lever. Effortlessly in their launching, they whirl away from Curbstone. In minutes there is a flicker of gray, or perhaps not even that.

Strange stars surround them. They stare at one another. They are elsewhere... *elsewhen*. Lights glow.

This one says the tight-beam has gone on, pouring out toward the neighbors and, through them, to all the others. That one cries “*emergency*” and Fort whips to the manual controls and does what he can to avoid a dust-cloud, a planet... perhaps an alien ship.

Fort and Mariellen (or George and Viki, or Bruce, who went Out by himself, or Eleanor and Grace, or Sam and Rod—they were brothers) may materialize and die in an intolerable matter-displacement explosion so quickly that there is no time for pain. They may be holed by a meteor and watch, with glazing freezing eyes, the froth bubbling up from each other’s bursting lungs. They may survive for minutes or weeks, and then fall captive to some giant planet or unsuspected sun. They may be hunted down and killed or captured by beings undreamed of.

And some of them will survive all this and wait for the blessed contact; the strident heralding of the matter transceiver with which each ship is equipped—and the abrupt appearance of a man, sixty centuries unborn when they left Curbstone, instantly transmitted from Earth to their vessel. Back with him they’ll go, to an unchanged and ecstatic Earth, teeming with billions of trained, mature humans ready to fill the universe with human ways—the new humans who have left war and greed behind them, who have acquired a universe so huge that they need exploit no creature’s properties, so rich and available is everything they require.

And some will survive, and wait, and die waiting because of some remotely extrapolated miscalculation. The beams never reach them; their beams contact nothing. And perhaps a few of these will not die, but will find refuge on some planet to leave a marker that will shock whatever is alive and intelligent a million years hence. Perhaps they will leave more than that. Perhaps there will be a slower, more hazardous planting of humanity in the gulfs.

But fifty-four per cent, the calculations insist, will establish the star-conquering sphere and return.

THE weeks went by. A chime: Bark and Barbara. Damn it all, no more of Barbara’s banana cream pie. The filing, the sweeping, the recording, the lights. Marriage recorded.

When a man and a woman go Out together, that is marriage. There is

another way to be married on Curbstone. There is a touch less speed involved in it than in joined hands pressing down a launching lever. There is not one whit less solemnity. It means what it means because it is not stamped with necessity. Children derive their names from their mothers, wed or not, and there is no distinction. Men and women, as responsible adults, do as they please within limits which are extremely wide. *Except...*

By arduous trial and tragic error, humanity has evolved modern marriage. With social pressure removed from the pursuit of a mate, with the end of the ribald persecution of spinsterhood, a marriage ceases to be a rubber stamp upon what people are sure to do, with or without ceremonies. Where men and women are free to seek their own company, as and when they choose, without social penalties, they will not be trapped into hypocrisies with marriage vows. Under such conditions a marriage is entered gravely and with sincerity, and it constitutes a public statement of choice and—with the full implementation of a mature society—of inviolability. The lovely, ancient words “forsaking all others” spell out the nature of modern marriage, with the universally respected adjunct that fidelity is not a command or a restriction, but a chosen path. Divorce is swift and simple, and almost unheard of. Married people live this way, single people live that way; the lines are drawn and deeply respected. People marry because they intend to live within the limits of marriage. The fact that a marriage exists is complete proof that it is working.

I had a word about marriage with Tween. Ran into her in the Gate corridor. I think she'd been in one of the ships again. If she was pale, her olive skin hid it. If her eyes were bloodshot, the lustrous ruby of her eyes covered it up. Maybe I saw her dragging her feet as she walked, or some such. I took her chin in my hand and tilted her head back. “Any dragons I can kill?”

She gave me a brilliant smile which lived only on her lips. “I’m wonderful,” she said bravely.

“You are,” I agreed. “Which doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the way you feel. I won’t pry, child; but tell me—if you ever ate too many green apples, or stubbed your toe on a cactus, do you know a nice safe something you could hang on to while you cried it out?”

“I do,” she said breathlessly, making the smile just as hard as she could. “Oh, I do.” She patted my cheek. “You’re... listen. Would you tell me something if I asked you?”

“About certificates? No, Tween. Not about anyone else’s certificate. But—all he has to do is complete his final hypnopediae, and he just hasn’t showed up.”

She hated to hear it, but I’d made her laugh, too, a little. “Do you read minds, the way they all say?”

“I do not. And if I could, I wouldn’t. And if I couldn’t help reading ’em, I’d sure never act as if I could. In other words, no. It’s just that I’ve been alive long enough to know what pushes people around.

So’s I don’t care much about a person, I can judge pretty well what’s bothering him.

“Course,” I added, “if I do give a damn, I can tell even better. Tween, you’ll be getting married pretty soon, right?”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have said that. She gasped, and for a moment she just stopped making that smile.

Then, “Oh, yes,” she said brightly. “Well, not exactly. What I mean is, when we go Out, you see, so we might as well not, and I imagine as soon as Wold gets his certificate, we’ll... we kind of feel going Out is the best—I seem to have gotten something in my eye. I’m s-sor...”

I let her go. But when I saw Wold next—it was down in the Euphoria Sector—I went up to him very cheerfully. There are ways I feel sometimes that make me real jovial.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. His back bowed a bit and it seemed to me I felt vertebrae grinding together. “Wold, old boy,” I said heartily. “Good to see you. You haven’t been around much recently.

Mad?”

He pulled away from me. “A little,” he said sullenly. His hair was too shiny and he had perfect teeth that always reminded me of a keyboard instrument.

“Well, drop around,” I said. “I like to see young folks get ahead. You,” I added with a certain amount of emphasis, “have gone pretty damn far.”

“So have you,” he said with even more emphasis.

“Well, then.” I slapped him on the back. His eyeballs stayed in, which

surprised me. “You can top me. You can go farther than I ever can. See you soon, old fellow.”

I WALKED off, feeling the cold brown points of his gaze.

And as it happened, next ten minutes later I saw that *kakumba* dance. I don’t see much dancing usually, but there was an animal roar from the dance-chamber that stopped me, and I ducked in to see what had the public so charmed.

The dance had gone through most of its figures, with the caller already worked up into a froth and only three couples left. As I shouldered my way to a vantage point, one of the three couples was bounced, leaving the two best. One was a tall blonde with periwigged hair and subvoltaic bracelets that passed and repassed a clatter of pastel arcs; she was dancing with one of the armor-monkeys from the Curbstone Hull Division, and they were good.

The other couple featured a slender, fluid dark girl in an open tunic of deep brown. She moved so beautifully that I caught my breath, and watched so avidly that it was seconds before I realized that it was Flower. The reaction to that made me lose more seconds in realizing that her partner was Judson. Good as the other couple were, they were better. I’d tested Jud’s reflexes, and they were phenomenal, but I’d had no idea he could respond like this to anything.

The caller threw the solo light to the first couple. There was a wild burst of music and the arc-wielding blonde and her arc-wielding boy friend cut loose in an intricate frenzy of disjointed limbs and half-beat stamping. So much happened between those two people so fast that I thought they’d never get separated when the music stopped. But they untangled right with the closing bars, and a roar went up from the people watching them. And then the same blare of music was thrown at Jud and Flower.

Judson simply stood back and folded his arms, walking out a simple figure to indicate that, honest, he was dancing, too. But he gave it all to Flower.

Now I’ll tell you what she did in a single sentence: she knelt before him and slowly stood up with her arms over her head. But words will never describe the process completely. It took her about twelve minutes to get all the way up. At the fourth minute the crowd began to realize that her body was trembling. It wasn’t a wriggle or a shimmy, or anything as crude as that. It was a steady, apparently

uncontrollable shiver. At about the eighth minute the audience began to realize it was controlled, and just how completely controlled it was. It was hypnotic, incredible. At the final crescendo she was on her tiptoes with her arms stretched high, and when the music stopped she made no flourish; she simply relaxed and stood still, smiling at Jud. Even from where I stood I could see the moisture on Jud's face.

A big man standing beside me grunted, a tight, painful sound. I turned to him; it was Clinton. Tension crawled through his jaw-muscles like a rat under a rug. I put my hand on his arm. It was rocky. "Clint."

"Wh—oh. Hi."

"Thirsty?"

"No," he said. He turned back to the dance floor, searched it with his eyes, found Flower.

"Yes, you are, son," I said. "Come on."

"Why don't you go and—" He got hold of himself. "You're right. I am thirsty."

We went to the almost deserted Card Room and dispensed ourselves some methyl-caffeine. I didn't say anything until we'd found a table. He sat stiffly looking at his drink without seeing it. Then he said,

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"I was about to be real uncivilized in there."

I just waited.

He, said truculently, "Well, damn it, she's free to do what she wants, isn't she? She likes to dance—good. Why shouldn't she? Damn it, what is there to get excited about?"

"Who's excited?"

"It's that Judson. What's he have to be crawling around her all the time for? She hasn't done a damn thing about getting her certificate since he got here." He drank his liquor down at a gulp. It had no apparent effect, which meant something.

“What had she done before he got here?” I asked quietly. When he didn’t answer I said, “Jud’s Outbound, Clint. I wouldn’t worry. I can guarantee Flower won’t be with him when he goes, and that will be real soon. Hold on and wait.”

“Wait?” His lip curled. “I’ve been ready to go for weeks. I used to think of... of Flower and me working together, helping, each other. I used to make plans for a celebration the day we got certified. I used to look at the stars and think about the net we’d help throw around them, pull ’em down, pack ’em in a basket. Flower and me, back on Earth after six thousand years, watching humanity come into its own, knowing we’d done something to help. I’ve been waiting, and you say wait some more.”

“This,” I said, “is what you call an unstable situation. It can’t stay the way it is and it won’t. Wait, I tell you: wait. There’s got to be a blow-off.”

There was.

IN MY office the chime sounded. Moira and Bill. Certificates denied to Hester, Elizabeth, Jenks, Mella. Hester back to earth. Hallowell and Letitia, marriage recorded. Certificates granted to Aaron, Musette, n’Guchi, Mancinelli, Judson.

Judson took the news quietly, glowing. I hadn’t seen much of him recently. Flower took up a lot of his time, and training the rest. After he was certified and I’d gone with him to test the hand-scanner by the gate and give him his final briefing, he cut out on the double, I guess to give Flower the great news. I remember wondering how he’d like her reaction.

WHEN I got back to my office Tween was there. She rose from the foyer couch as I wheezed in off the ramp. I took one look at her and said, “Come inside.” She followed me through the inner door. I waved my hand over the infra-red plate and it closed. Then I out out my arms.

She bleated like a new-born lamb and flew to me. Her tears were scalding, and I don’t think human muscles are built for the wrenching those agonized sobs gave her. People should cry more. They ought to learn how to do it easily, like laughing or sweating. Crying piles up. In people like Tween, who do nothing if they can’t smile and make a habit-pattern of it, it really piles up. With a reservoir like that, and no developed outlet, things get torn when the pressure builds too high.

I just held her tight so she wouldn't explode. The only thing I said to her was "sh-h-h" once when she tried to talk while she wept. One thing at a time.

It took a while, but when she was finished she was finished. She didn't taper off. She was weak from all that punishment, but calm. She talked.

"He isn't a real thing at all," she said bleakly. "He's something I made up out of starshine, out of wanting so much to be a part of something as big as this project. I never felt I had anything big about me except that. I wanted to join it with something bigger than I was, and, together, we'd build something so big that it would be worthy of Curbstone.

"I thought it was Wold. I *made* it be Wold. Oh, none of this is his fault. I could have seen what he was, and I just wouldn't. What I did with him, what I felt for him, was just as crazy as if I'd convinced myself he had wings and then hated him because he wouldn't fly. He isn't anything but a h-hero. He struts to the newcomers and the rejected ones pretending he's a man who will one day give himself to humanity and the stars. He... probably believes that about himself. But he won't complete his training, and he...

now I know, now I can see it—he tried everything he could think of to stop me from being certified. I was no use to him with a certificate. He couldn't treat me as his pretty, slightly stupid little girl, once I was certified. And he couldn't get his own certificate because if he did he'd have to go Out, one of these days, and that's something he can't face.

"He— *wants* me to leave him. If I will, if it's my decision, he can wear my memory like a black band on his arm, and delude himself for the rest of his life that his succession of women is just a search for something to replace me. Then he'll always have an excuse; he'll never, never have to risk his neck. He'll be the shattered hero, and women as stupid as I was will try to heal the wounds he's arranged for me to give him."

"You don't hate him?" I asked her quietly.

"No. Oh, no, *no!* I told you, it wasn't his fault. I—loved *something*. A man lived in my heart, lived there for years. He had no name and no face. I gave him Wold's name and Wold's face and just wouldn't believe it wasn't Wold. I did it. Wold didn't. I don't hate him. I don't like him. I just don't...

anything.”

I PATTED her shoulder. “Good. You’re cured. If you hated him, he’d still be important. What are you going to do?”

“What shall I do?”

“I’d never tell you what to do about a thing like this, Tween. You know that. You’ve got to figure out your own answers. I can advise you to use those new-opened eyes of yours carefully, though. And don’t think that that man who lives in your heart doesn’t exist anywhere else. He does. Right here on this station, maybe. You just haven’t been able to see him before.”

“Who?”

“God, girl, don’t ask me that! Ask Tween next time you see her; no one will ever know for sure but Tween.”

“You’re so wise...”

“Nah. I’m old enough to have made more mistakes than most people, that’s all, and I have a good memory.”

She rose shakily. I put out a hand and helped her. “You’re played out, Tween. Look—don’t go back yet. Hide out for a few days and get some rest and do some thinking. There’s a suite on this level. No one will bother you, and you’ll find everything there you need, including silence and privacy.”

“That would be good,” she said softly. “Thank you.”

“All right... listen. Mind if I send someone in to talk to you?”

“Talk? Who?”

“Let me play it as it comes.”

The ruby eyes sent a warm wave to me, and she smiled. I thought, I wish I was as confident of myself as she is of me. “It’s 412,” I said, “the third door to your left. Stay there as long as you want to. Come back when you feel like it.”

She came close to me and tried to say something. I thought for a second she was going to kiss me on the mouth. She didn’t; she kissed my hand. “I’ll swat your bottom!” I roared, flustered. “Git, now,

dammit!” She laughed... she always had a bit of laughter tucked away in her, no matter what, bless her cotton head...

As soon as she was gone, I turned to the annunciator and sent out a call for Judson. *Hell*, I thought, *you can try, can't you?* Waiting, I thought about Judson's hungry, upward look, and that hole in his head... that quality of reachableness, and what happened when he was reached by the wrong thing.

Lord, responsive people certainly make the worst damn fools of all!

He was there in minutes, looking flushed, excited, happy, and worried all at once. “Was on my way here when your call went out,” he said.

“SIT down, Jud. I have a small project in mind. Maybe you could help.”

He sat. I looked for just the right words to use. I couldn't say anything about Flower. She had her hooks into him; if I said anything about her, he'd defend her. And one of the oldest phenomena in human relations is that we come to be very fond of the thing we find ourselves defending, even if we didn't like it before. I thought again of the hunger that lived in Jud, and what Tween might see of it with her newly opened eyes.

“Jud—”

“I'm married,” he blurted.

I sat very still. I don't think my face did anything at all.

“It was the right thing for me to do,” he said, almost angrily. “Don't you see? You know what my problem is—it was you who found it for me. I was looking for something that should belong to me... or something to belong to.”

“Flower,” I said.

“Of course. Who else? Listen, that girl's got trouble, too. What do you suppose blocks her from taking her certificate? She doesn't think she's *worthy* of it.”

My, I said. Fortunately, I said it to myself.

Jud said, “No matter what happens, I've done the right thing. If I can help her get her certificate, we'll go Out together, and that's what

we're here for. If I can't help her do that, but find that she fills that place in me that's been so empty for so long, well and good—that's what *I'm* here for. We can go back to Earth and be happy."

"You're quite sure of all this."

"Sure I'm sure! Do you think I'd have gone ahead with the marriage if I weren't sure?"

Sure you would, I thought. I said, "Congratulations, then. You know I wish you the best."

He stood up uncertainly, started to say something, and apparently couldn't find it. He went to the door, turned back. "Will you come for dinner tonight?" I hesitated. He said, "Please. I'd appreciate it."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Answer me straight, Jud. Is dinner your idea or Flower's?"

He laughed embarrassedly. "Damn it, you always see too much. Mine... sort of... I mean, it isn't that she dislikes you, but... well, hell, I want the two of you to be friends, and I think you'd understand her and me, too, a lot better if you made the effort."

I could think of things I'd much rather do than have dinner with Flower. A short swim in boiling oil, for example. I looked up at his anxious face. Oh, hell. "I'd love to," I said. "Around eight?"

"Fine! Gee," he said, like a school kid. "Gee, thanks." He shuffled, not knowing whether to go right away or not. "Hey," he said suddenly. "You sent out a call for me. What's this project you wanted me for?"

"Nothing, Jud," I said tiredly. "I've... changed my mind. See you later, son."

THE dinner was something special. Steaks. Jud had broiled them himself. I got the idea that he'd selected them, too, and set the table. It was Flower, though, who got me something to sit on. She looked me over, slowly and without concealing it, went to the table, pulled the light formed-aluminum chair away, and dragged over a massive relaxer. She then smiled straight at me. A little unnecessary, I thought; I'm bulky, but those aluminum chairs have always held up under me so far.

I won't give it to you round by round. The meal passed with Flower either in a sullen silence or manufacturing small brittle whips of

conversation. When she was quiet, Jud tried to goad her into talking.

When she talked, he tried to turn the conversation away from me. The occasion, I think, was a complete success—for Flower. For Jud it must have been hell. For me—well, it was interesting.

Item: Flower poked and prodded at her steak, and when she got a lull in the labored talk Jud and I were squeezing out, she began to cut meticulously around the edges of the steak. “If there is anything I can’t stand the sight or the smell of,” she said clearly, “it’s fat.”

Item: She said, “Oh, Lord” this and “Lord sakes” that in a drawl that made it come out “Lard” every time.

Item: I sneezed once. She whipped a tissue over to me swiftly and politely enough, and then said

“Render unto sneezers...” which stood as a cute quip until she nudged her husband and said, “*Render!*”

at which point things got real hushed.

Item: When she had finished, she leaned back and sighed. “If I ate like that all the time, I’d be as big as—” She looked straight at me and stopped. Jud, flushing miserably, tried to kick her under the table; I know, because it was me he kicked. Flower finished, “—as big as a lifeboat.” But she kept looking at me, easily and insultingly.

Item—You get the idea. All I can say for myself is that I got through it all. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of driving me out until I’d had all she could give me. I wouldn’t be overtly angry, because if I did, she’d present me to Jud ever after as the man who hated her. If Jud ever had wit enough, this evening could be remembered as the time she was insufferably insulting, and that was all I wanted.

It was over at last, and I made my excuses as late as I possibly could without staying overnight. As I left, she took Jud’s arm and held it tight until I was out of sight, thereby removing the one chance he had to come along a little way and apologize to me.

He didn’t get close enough to speak to me for four days, and when he did, I had the impression that he had lied to be there, that Flower thought he was somewhere else. He said rapidly, “About the other night, you mustn’t think that—”

And I cut him off as gently and firmly as I could: “I understand it

perfectly, Jud. Think a minute and you'll know that."

"Look, Flower was just out of sorts. I'll work on her. Next time you come there'll be a real difference. You'll see."

"I'm sure I will, Jud. But drop it, will you? There's no harm done." And I thought, next time I come will be six months after the Outbounders get back. That gives me sixty centuries or so to get case-hardened.

ABOUT a week after Jud's wedding, I was in the Upper Central corridor where it ramps into the Gate passageway. Now whether it was some sixth sense, or whether I actually did smell something, I don't know. I got a powerful, sourceless impression of methyl-caffeine in the air, and at the same time I looked down the passage and saw the Gate just closing.

I got down there altogether too fast to do my leaky valves any good. I palmed the doors open and sprinted across the court. When anything my size and shape gets to sprinting, it's harder to stop it than let it keep going. One of the ship ports was open and I was heading for it. It started to swing closed. I lost all thought of trying to slow down and put what little energy I could find into pumping my old legs faster.

With a horrible slow-motion feeling of disaster, I felt one toe tip my other heel, and my center of gravity began to move forward faster than I was traveling. I was in mid-air for an age—long enough to chew and swallow a tongue—and then I hit on my stomach, rocked forward on my receding chest and two of my chins, and slid. I had my hands out in front of me. My left hit the bulkhead and buckled. My right shot through what was left of the opening of the door, which crunched shut on my forearm. Then my forehead hit the sill and I blacked out.

When the lights dimmed on again, I was spread out on a ship's bunk, apparently alone. My left arm hurt more than I could bear, and my right arm hurt worse, and both of them together couldn't match what was going on in my head.

A man appeared from the service cubicle when I let out a groan. He had a bowl of warm water and the ship's B first-aid kit in his hands. He crossed quickly to me, and began to stanch the blood from between some of my chins. It wasn't until then that my blurring sight made out who he was.

"Clinton, you hub-forted son of a bastich!" I roared at him. "Leave the chin alone and get some plexicaine into those arms!"

HE HAD the gall to laugh at me. “One thing at a time, old man. You are bleeding. Let’s try to be a patient, not an impatient.”

“Impatient, out-patient,” I yelled, “get that plex into me! I am just not the strong, silent type!”

“Okay, okay.” He got the needle out of the kit, squirted it upward, and plunged it deftly into my arms.

A good boy. He hit the bicep on one, the forearm on the other, and got just the right ganglia. The pain vanished. That left my head, but he fed me an analgesic and that cataclysmic ache began to recede.

“I’m afraid the left is broken,” he said. “As for the right—well, if I hadn’t seen that hand come crawling in over the sill like a pet puppy, and reversed the door control, I’d have cut your fingernails off clear up to the elbow. What in time did you think you were doing?”

“I can’t remember; maybe I’ve got a concussion. For some reason or other it seemed I had to look inside the ship. Can you splint this arm?”

“Let’s call the medic.”

“You can do just as well.” He went for the C kit and got a traction splint out. He whipped the prepared cushioning around the swelling arm, clamped the ends of the splint at wrist and elbow, and played an infra-red lamp on it. In a few seconds the splint began to lengthen. When the broken forearm was a few millimeters longer than the other, he shut off the heat and the thermoplastic splint automatically set and snugged into the cushioning. Clinton threw off the clamps. “That’s good enough for now. All right, are you ready to tell me what made you get in my way?”

“No.”

“Stop trying to look like an innocent babe! Your stubble gives you away. You knew I was going to solo, didn’t you?”

“No one said anything to me.”

“No one ever has to,” he said in irritation, and then chuckled. “Man, I wish I could stay mad at you.

All right—what next?”

“You’re not going to take off?”

“With you in here? Don’t be foolish. The station’d lose too much and I wouldn’t be gaining a thing.

Damn you! I’d worked up the most glamorous drunk on methyl-caffeine, and you had to get me all anxious and drive away the fumes... Well, go ahead. I’ll play it your way. What do we do?”

“Stop trying to make a Machiavelli out of me,” I growled. “Give me a hand back to my quarters and I’ll let you go do whatever you want.”

“It’s never that simple with you,” he half-grinned. “Okay. Let’s go.”

When I got to my feet—with more of his help than I like to admit—my heart began to pound. He must have felt it, because he said nothing while we stood there and waited for it to behave itself. Clinton was a good lad.

We negotiated the court and the Gate all right, but slowly. When we got to the foot of my ramp, I shook my head. “Not that,” I wheezed.

“Couldn’t make it. Down this way.”

WE WENT down the lateral corridor to 412. The door slid back for me.

“Hi!” I called. “Company.”

“What? Who is it?” came the crystal voice. Tween appeared. “Oh—oh! I didn’t want to see anyone just—why, what’s happened?”

My eyelids flickered. I moaned. Clinton said, “I think we better get him spread out. He’s not doing so well.”

Tween ran to us and took my arm gently above the splint. They got me to a couch and I collapsed on it.

“Damn him,” said Clinton good-humoredly. “He seems to be working full time to keep me from going Out.”

There was such a long silence that I opened one eye to look at them. Tween was staring at him as if she had never seen him before—as, actually, she hadn’t, with her eyes so full of Wold.

“Do you really want to go Out?” she asked softly.

“More than...” He looked at her hair, her lovely face. “I don’t think

I've seen you around much.

You're—Tween, aren't you?"

She nodded and they stopped talking. I snapped my eyes shut because they were sure to look at me just for something to do.

"Is he all right?" she asked.

"I think he's—yes, he's asleep. Don't wonder. He's been through a lot."

"Let's go in the other room where we can talk together without disturbing him."

They closed the door. I could barely hear them. It went on for a long time, with occasional silences.

Finally I heard what I'd been listening for: "If it hadn't been for him, I'd be gone now. I was just about to solo."

"No! Oh, I'm glad... I'm glad you didn't."

One of those silences. Then, "So am I, Tween. Tween..." in a whisper of astonishment.

I got up off the couch and silently let myself out. I went back to my quarters, even managing to climb the ramp. I felt real fine.

I HEARD an ugly rumor. I'd seen a lot and I'd done a lot, and I regarded myself as pretty shockproof, but this one jolted me to the core. I took refuge in the old ointment, "It can't be, it just can't be," but in my heart I knew it could.

I got hold of Judson. He was hollow-eyed and much quieter than usual. I asked him what he was doing these days, though I knew.

"Boning up on the fine points of astrogation," he told me. "I've never hit anything so fascinating. It's one thing to have the stuff shoveled into your head when you're asleep, and something else again to experience it all, note by note, like music."

"But you're spending an awful lot of time in the archives, son."

"It takes a lot of time."

"Can't you study at home?"

I think he only just then realized what I was driving at. “Look,” he said quietly, “I have my troubles. I have things wrong with me. But I’m not blind. I’m not stupid. You wouldn’t tell me to my face that I couldn’t handle problems that are strictly my own, would you?”

“I would if I were sure,” I said. “Damn it, I’m not. And I’m not going to pry for details.”

“I’m glad of that,” he said soberly. “Now we don’t have to talk about it at all, do we?”

In spite of myself, I laughed aloud.

“What’s funny?”

“I am, Jud, boy. I been—handled.”

He saw the point, and smiled a little with me. “Hell, I know what you’ve been hinting at. But you’re not close enough to the situation to know all the angles. I am. When the time comes, I’ll take care of it.

Until then, it’s no one’s problem but my own.”

He picked up his star-chart reels and I knew that one single word more would be one too many. I squeezed his arm and let him go.

Five people, I thought: Wold, Judson, Tween, Clinton, Flower. Take away two and that leaves three.

Three’s a crowd—in this case, a very explosive kind of crowd.

Nothing, *nothing* justifies infidelity in a modern marriage. But the ugly rumors kept trickling in.

“I want my certificate,” Wold said.

I looked up at him and a bushel of conjecture flipped through my mind. So you want your certificate?

Why? And why just now, of all times? What can a man do with a certificate that he can’t do without one—aside from going Out? Because, damn you, you’ll never go Out. Not of your own accord, you won’t.

All this, but none of it slipped out. I said, “All right. That’s what I’m here for, Wold.” And we got to work.

He worked hard, and smoothly and easily, the way he talked, the way he moved. I am constantly astonished at how small accomplished people can make themselves at times.

He was certified easy as breathing. And can you believe it, I worked with him, saw how hard he was working, helped him through, and never realized what it was he was after?

After going through the routines of certification for him, I wasn't happy. There was something wrong somewhere... something missing. This was a puzzle that ought to fall together easily, and it wouldn't. I wish—Lord, how I wish I could have thought a little faster.

I let a day go by after Wold was certified. I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't eat, and I couldn't analyze what it was that was bothering me. So I began to cruise, to see if I could find out.

I went to the archives. "Where's Judson?"

The girl told me he hadn't been there for forty-eight hours.

I looked in the Recreation Sector, in the libraries, in the stereo and observation rooms. Some kind of rock-bottom good sense kept me from sending out a general call for him. But it began to be obvious that he just wasn't around. Of course, there were hundreds of rooms and corridors in Curbstone that were unused—they wouldn't be used until the interplanetary project was completed and the matter transmitters started working. But Jud wasn't the kind to hide from anything.

I squared my shoulders and realized that I was doing a lot of speculation to delay looking in the obvious place. I think, more than anything else, I was afraid that he would *not* be there...

I passed my hand over the door announcer. In a moment she answered; she had apparently come in from the sun-field and hadn't bothered to see who it was. She was warm brown from head to toe, all spring-steel and velvet. Her long eyes were sleepy and her mouth was pouty. But when she recognized me, she stood squarely in the doorway.

I think that in the back of every human mind is a machine that works out all the answers and never makes mistakes. I think mine had had enough data to figure out what was happening, what was going to happen, for a long while now. Only I hadn't been able to read the answer until now. Seeing Flower, in that split second, opened more

than one door for me...

"You want something?" she asked. The emphasis was hard and very insulting.

I went in. It was completely up to her whether she moved aside or was walked down. She moved aside. The door swung shut.

"Where's Jud?"

"I don't know."

I LOOKED into those long secret eyes and raised my hand. I think I was going to hit her. Instead I put my hand on her chest and shoved. She fell, unhurt but terrified, across a relaxer. "What do you th—"

"You won't see him again," I said, and my voice bounced harshly off the acoust-absorbing walls.

"He's gone. *They're* gone."

"They?" Her face went pasty under the deep tan.

"You ought to be killed," I said. "But I think it's better if you live with it. You couldn't hold either of them, or anyone else."

I went out.

MY HEAD was buzzing and my knitting arm throbbed. I moved with utter certainty; never once did it occur to me to ask myself: "Why did I say that?" All the ugly pieces made sense.

I found Wold in the Recreation Sector. He was tanked. I decided against speaking to him, went straight to the launching court and tried the row of ship ports. There was no one there, no one in any of them. My eye must have photographed something in the third ship, because I felt compelled to go back there and look again.

I stared hard at the deep-flocked floor. The soft pile of it looked right and yet not-right. I went to the control panel and unracked an emergency torch, turned it to needle-focus and put it, lit, on the floor. A horizontal beam will tell you things no other light knows about.

I turned the light on the door and slowly swung the sharp streak across the carpet. The monotone, amorphous surface took on streaks and ridges, shadows and shadings. A curved scuff inside. Two parallel ones, long, where something had been dragged. A blurred sector

where something heavy had lain long enough to press the springy fibers down for a while, over by the left-hand bunk.

I looked at the bunk. It was unruffled, which meant nothing; the resilient surface was meant to leave no impressions. But at the edge was a single rubbed spot, as if something had spilled there and been wiped hard.

I went to the service cubicle. Everything seemed in order, except one of the cabinet doors, which wouldn't quite close. I looked inside.

It was a food locker. The food was there all right, each container socketed in place in the prepared shelves. But on, between, and among them were micro-reels for the book projector.

I frowned and looked further. Reels were packed into the disposal lock, the towel dispenser, the spare-parts chest for the air exchanger.

Something was where the book-reels belonged, and the reels had been hidden by someone who could not leave them in sight or carry them off.

And where did the reels belong?

I went back to the central chamber and the left-hand bunk. I touched the stud that should have rolled the bunk outward, opening the top, so that the storage space under it could be reached. The bunk didn't move.

I examined the stud. It was coated over with quick-setting leak-sealer. The stuff was tough but resilient. I got a steel rod and a hammer from the tool-rack and, placing the rod against the stud, hit it once. The leak-sealer cracked off. The bed rolled forward and opened.

It was useless to move him or touch him, or, for that matter, to say anything. Judson was dead, his head twisted almost all the way around. His face was bluish and his eyes stared. He was pushed, jammed, wedged into the small space.

I hit the stud again and the bunk rolled back. Moving without any volition that I could analyze, feeling nothing but a great angry numbness, I cleaned up. I put the rod and the hammer away and fluffed up the piling of the carpeting by the bunk. Then I went and stood in the service cubicle and began to wait.

Wait. Not just stay—wait. I knew he'd be back, just as I suddenly and

belatedly understood what it was that every factor in five people had made inevitable. I was coldly hating myself for not having known it sooner.

The great, the admirable, the adventurous in modern civilization were Outbounders. To one who wanted and needed personal power, there would be an ultimate goal, greater even than being an Outbinder. And that would be to stand between an Outbinder and his destiny.

For months Flower had blocked Clinton. When she saw she must ultimately lose him to the stars, she went hunting. She saw Judson—reachable, restless Jud—and she heard my assurance that he would soon go Out. Then and there Judson was doomed.

Wold needed admiration the way Flower needed power. To be an Outbinder and wait for poor struggling Tween suited him perfectly. Tween's certification gave him no alternative but to get rid of her; he couldn't bring himself to go Out

Once I had taken care of Tween for him, there remained one person on the entire project who could keep him from going Out—and she was married to Jud. Having married, Jud would stay married. Wold did what he could to smash that marriage. When Jud still hung on, wanting to help Flower, wanting to show me that he had made the right choice, there remained one alternative for Wold. Evidence of that lay cramped and staring under the bunk.

But Wold wasn't finished. He wouldn't be finished while Jud's body remained on Curbstone. In Wold's emotional state, he would have to go somewhere and drink to figure out the next step. There was no way of sending a ship Out without riding it. So—I waited.

HE CAME back all right. I was cramped, then, and one foot was asleep. I curled and uncurled the toes frantically when I saw the door begin to move, and tried to flatten my big bulk back down out of sight.

He was breathing hard. He put his lips together and blew like a winded horse, wiped his lips on his forearm. He seemed to have difficulty in focusing his eyes. I wondered how much liquor he had poured into that empty place where most men keep their courage.

He took a fine coil of single-strand plastic cord out of his belt-pouch. Fumbling for the end, he found it and dropped the coil. With the exaggerated care of a drunk, he threw a bowline and drew the loop tight, pulled the bight through the loop so he had a running noose. He

made this fast to a triangular bracket over the control panel, led it along the edge of the chart-rack and down to the launching control lever. He bent two half-hitches in the cord, slipped it over the end of the lever and drew it tight. The cord now bound the lever in the up—"off"—position.

From the bulkhead he unfastened the clamps which held the heavy-duty fire extinguisher and lifted it down. It weighed half as much as he did. He set it on the floor in front of the control panel, brought the dangling end of the cord through the U-shaped clamp gudgeons on the extinguisher, took a loose half-hitch around the bight, and, lifting the extinguisher between his free arm and his body, pulled the knot tight. Another half-hitch secured it.

Now the heavy extinguisher dangled in mid-air under the control panel. The cord which supported it ran up to the handle of the launching lever and from there, bending over the edge of the chart-rack, to the bracket.

Panting, Wold took out a cigarette and shook it alight. He drew on it hungrily, and then put it on the chart-rack, resting it against the plastic cord.

When the cigarette burned down to the cord, the thermoplastic would melt through with great enthusiasm. The cord would break, the extinguisher would fall, dragging the lever down. And Out would go all the evidence, to be hidden forever, as far as Wold was concerned, and 6,000 years from anyone else.

Wold stepped back to survey his work just as I stepped forward out of the service cubicle. I brought up my broken arm and swung it with all my weight—and that is really weight—against the side of his head. The cast, though not heavy, was hard, and it must have hit him like a crowbar.

He went down like an elevator, hitched to his knees, and for a second seemed about to topple. His head sagged. He shook it, slowly looked up and saw me.

"I could use one of those needle-guns," I said. "Or I could kick you cold and let Coördination handle you. There are regulations for things like you. But I'd rather do it this way. Get up."

"I never..."

"Get up!" I bellowed, and kicked at him.

He threw his arms around my leg and rolled. As I started down, I pulled the leg in close and whipped it out again. We both hit with a crash on opposite sides of the room. The bunk broke my fall; he was not so lucky. He rose groggily, sliding his back up the door. I lumbered across, deliberately crashed into him, and heard ribs crack as the wind gushed out of his lungs.

I STOOD back a little as he began to sag. I hit him savagely in the face, and his face came back and hit my hand again as his head bounced off the door. I let him fall, then knelt beside him.

There are things you can do to a human body if you know enough physiology—pressures on this and that nerve center which paralyze and cramp and immobilize whole motor-trunk systems. I did these things, and got up, finally, leaving him twisted, sweating in agony. I wheezed over to the control bank and looked critically at the smoldering cigarette. Less than a minute.

“I know you can hear me,” I whispered with what breath I could find. “I’d... like you to know... that you’ll be a hero. Your name will... be on the Great Roll of the... Outbounders. You always... wanted that without any... effort on your part... now you’ve got it.”

I went out. I stopped and leaned back against the wall beside the door. In a few seconds it swung silently shut. I forced back the waves of gray that wanted to engulf me, turned and peered into the port. It showed only blackness.

Jud ... Jud, boy ... you always wanted it, too. You almost got cheated out of it. You’ll be all right now, son... .

I TOTTERED across the court and out the gate. There was someone standing there. She flew to me, pounded my chest with small hard hands. “Did he go? Did he really go?”

I brushed her off as if she had been a midge, and closed one eye so I could get a single image. It was Flower, without her come-on tunic. Her hair was disarrayed and her eyes were bloodshot.

“*They* left,” I croaked. “I told you they would. Jud and Wold... you couldn’t stop them.”

“Together? They left *together*?”

“That’s what Wold got certified for.” I looked bluntly up and down her supple body. “Like everybody else who goes Out together, they had

some thing in common.”

I pushed past her and went back to my office. Lights were blazing over the desk. Judson and Wold.

Ship replaced. Quarters cleaned. Palm-key removed and filed. I sat and looked blindly until they were all lit and the board blanked out.

I thought, this pump of mine won't last much longer under this kind of treatment.

I thought, I keep convincing myself that I handle things impartially and fairly, without getting involved.

I felt bad. Bad.

I thought, this is a job without authority, without any real power. I certify 'em, send 'em along, check

'em out. A clerk's job. And because of that I have to be God. I have to make up my own justice, and execute it myself. Wold was no threat to me or to Curbstone, yet it was in me to give oblivion to him and purgatory to Flower.

I felt frightened and disgusted and puny.

Someone came in, and I looked up blindly. For a moment I could make out nothing but a silver-haloed figure and a muted, wordless murmuring. I forced my eyes to focus, and I had to close them again, as if I had looked into the sun.

Her hair was unbound beneath a diamond ring that circled her brows. The silver silk cascaded about her, brushing the floor behind her, mantling her warm-toned shoulders, capturing small threads of light and weaving them in and about the gleaming light that was her hair. Her deep pigeon's-blood eyes shone and her lips trembled.

“Tween...”

The soft murmuring became words, laughter that wept with happiness, small shaking syllables of rapture. “He's waiting. He wanted to say good-by to you, too... but he asked me to do it for him. He said you'd like that better.”

I could only nod.

She came close to the desk. “I love him. I love him more than I

thought anyone could. Somehow, loving him that much, I can love you, too...”

She bent over the desk and kissed my mouth. Her lips were cool. She—blurred then. Or maybe it was my eyes. When I could see again, she was gone.

The chime, and the lights, one after another.

Marriage recorded...

Suddenly I relaxed and I knew I could live with the viciousness of what I had done to Wold and to Flower. It had been my will that Judson go Out, and that Tween be happy, and I had been crossed, and I had taken vengeance. And that was small, and decidedly human—not godlike at all.

So, I thought, every day I find something out about people. And, today, I’m people. I felt the pudgy lips that Tween had kissed. I’m old and I’m fat, I thought, and by the Lord, I’m people.

When they call me Charon, they forget what it must be like to be denied both worlds instead of only one.

And they forget the other thing— the little-known fragment of the Charon legend. To the Etruscans, he was more than a ferryman.

He was an executioner.

The End.